

SECRET JEWS OF PERSIA

A Century-Old Marrano Community in Asia

WALTER J. FISCHEL

OF THE sixty thousand Jews in Persia, most live in the large cities—Teheran, Hamadan, and others—with smaller groups in many towns and villages. By and large, they earn their living as merchants, peddlers, and handicraftsmen, and though some are wealthy, the majority share the generally low Oriental standard of living, besides suffering special disabilities because of their religion. As an escape, a number have recently become converted—some to Protestantism, many more to the Bahai creed.

Just at this time, ironically enough, the existence of a group of Persian "marranos" has been authenticated—that is, Jews who had been forcibly converted to Mohammedanism but who remained, in devious ways, faithful to the religion of their birth. (The term "marrano" was originally applied to the Spanish and Portuguese Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity at the time of the Inquisition, but who secretly continued Jewish practices.) Documents and other materials, brought back from a personal visit, enable us now to piece together the story of these "neo-Moslems"—or, in Persian, "Jadid

al-Islam"—who for more than a century have lived an uneasy dual existence.

ISLAM became the state religion in Persia in 641 CE, it will be remembered, when the country was conquered by the Arabs. However, it was not until the 16th century, when the Safawid dynasty established the Shia branch of Islam as the dominant official Persian religion, that the Jewish community in Persia was endangered. As compared to Sunni Islam, Shia Islam was extremely intolerant, and under its characteristic concept of the ritual uncleanness of "non-believer" it enforced disastrous laws against the Jews.

Under these laws, setting Jew apart from Moslem, the Jew's clothes and headgear had to be different, his house and door smaller; he might ride his donkey only side-saddle, while riding a horse was altogether prohibited. A Jew might not leave his house during rain, for the water, having touched a Jew, might then touch a true believer and defile him; a Jew was forbidden to raise his voice in the presence of a Moslem, and he was required to salute every Moslem he met. The life of the Jews was additionally burdened by exorbitant taxes. These persecutions ceased upon conversion to Islam, a course always left open. Additional pressure toward conversion lay in the fact that a Jew who became a Moslem was then the only legal heir to the possessions of his family and relatives.

Under the rule of Nadir Shah (1736-47), a tolerant Sunni ruler, their position was somewhat relieved. He founded a Jewish community in Meshhed, an important town on the Afghan frontier. However, Meshhed was a holy city which annually harbored thousands of Moslem pilgrims. The exist-

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ence of the Jewish community was a constant source of friction, and it suffered continuous persecution by Shia fanatics. Nevertheless, the community survived for one hundred years, until in 1839 the incident occurred which led to its destruction.

ON THE 10th of Muharram, the holiest day of the Shia sect (the day of mourning for Husain, the grandson of Mohammed), a Jewish woman of Meshhed went to a Persian doctor for treatment of her hand. The doctor told her to wash her hand in the blood of a newly killed dog. The woman hired a Persian boy to catch a dog in the street and then kill it in her courtyard. Following a dispute about payment the boy ran off in a rage. A rumor started that the Jews had killed a dog on the holiest of holy days and had even called it Husain to insult the Mohammedans. When this rumor reached the thousands assembled in mourning at the Mosque of the Imam Riza, hundreds of the devout, together with Shaikhs, Mullahs, Sayyids, and other spiritual leaders, rushed to the Jewish quarter. There they plundered, robbed, and burned. Soon the synagogue and the scrolls of the Law stood in flames; many scores of Jews were wounded and some thirty-five were left dead in the streets. The mob would have destroyed the entire Jewish quarter had not a group of priests given their word that the survivors would be converted to Islam by force.

For the remaining Jews the only chance of survival was to recite the Moslem confession of faith. This they did, and on the following day they were officially accepted into Islam. The head of the Shia clergy had the Jews brought to the Mosque where they were again forced to recite the formula "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet." By this act the Jews ceased to be non-believers and became Moslems. They were now called "Jadid al-Islam," or neo-Moslem.

With his acceptance of Islam, the convert was immediately freed from all his previous restrictions; he was no longer required to wear a special hat or have his hair dressed

in a special way or wear any particular Jewish badge on his clothes, nor was he required to pay the poll-tax (*jizya*). His "uncleanliness" was gone—he was now a Moslem among Moslems.

In return the converted Jews had to break completely with their past. Under the instructions of the priests they had to Islamize their names, a special register being sometimes kept for this purpose in which the names of the newly converted were entered. The scrolls of the Law were either destroyed or taken to the library of the mosque (where to this day some may be found). The synagogue was pulled down and a mosque was erected in its place.

When the muezzin called them to prayer, the Persian marranos came with the rest of the faithful to the mosque. In the early days they were watched closely and were always compelled to recite the "Kalima," the Mohammedan confession of faith. A Jadid could recite the first part without religious or intellectual scruples. But, in the second part, there is the sentence, "Mohammed is the Prophet of God." Here they used secretly to substitute the name Musa (Moses) for that of Mohammed. (There were also certain secret prayers which the Jedidim recited before entering a mosque.)

The mosque now became the legal meeting place of the Jedidim. There, they were under the supervision of the chief priest, the Mujtahid, who exercised the dual role of instructor in Mohammedanism and inquisitor for Islam. He acted as the official head of the Jews as well as their supreme judicial authority. Demanding diligent study of the Koran and the traditional books, he forbade ritual slaughtering, circumcision on the 8th day, ordered mixed marriages between Jedidim and Moslems, and was empowered to grant permission for burial.

IN 1839, then, the Jewish community in Meshhed officially ceased to exist. Yet this forced conversion could not extinguish Judaism in the hearts of the Jedidim; the hope that they might one day return to their own religion remained alive in them.

At first the Jedidim met secretly only once a week for Jewish prayers on the Sabbath. Having prayed in the mosque early Friday as Moslems, they would secretly assemble the same evening in a subterranean room to hold the *maariv* service. Such meetings were only made possible by the fact that in Islamic countries it is an offense against the law to enter a strange house in which there are women. By having women seated in front of their homes, the Jedidim could congregate without being surprised by outsiders. Even when raids were made on Jedidim houses, as happened frequently through denunciation, the women were able to warn of danger through signaling the arrival of police.

The circle of Jedidim was not content with holding religious meetings. Soon its members met for the study of Torah and, above all, for instruction of the young in Judaism. The important Jewish laws such as circumcision, the dietary laws, etc., were soon again secretly observed. In addition there was a Beth Din where the Jedidim settled their quarrels among themselves without recourse to an Islamic judge.

Secret religious services were held on the Sabbath. Shops had to be kept open, but efforts were made to avoid business transactions. A little boy would sit in a shop and inform customers that the owner was away or that the desired article was out of stock. Since *mezuzot* could not be fastened on the outer doors leading to the courtyard, they were kept in the inner rooms and explained to visitors as a kind of talisman or protection from the evil eye. Circumcision was practiced without difficulty, because the Moslems too have this rite, although it is carried out not on the 8th day but later in life. On Pesach, matzot was eaten, but bread was bought on the market to avoid suspicion.

In earlier days the Islamic authorities insisted on mixed marriages as proof of allegiance to Islam. Cases are recorded where even high ranking religious officials, by virtue of their authority, demanded Jewish maidens of the Jedidim in marriage. The refusal of their parents to agree to such unions nearly

brought new catastrophe on the Jedidim community. But the Jedidim took advantage of the general Persian custom of contracting early marriages. At the age of five or six, children of Jedidim families were already promised in marriage by their parents as future husbands or wives, and every approach by a Mohammedan suitor could be met with "already promised."

UNTIL recently, it was believed that Jewish life in Meshhed had disappeared. Now documents have been found which prove that marrano Jews actually exist today, to the number of some 3,000.

Recently found ketubot, or marriage contracts, clearly illustrate the duality of the religious life of the Jedidim. The solemnization of a Jewish marriage naturally took place in secret before a Beth Din, of whose existence the Islamic clergy was unaware. But, officially, the Jedidim had to celebrate their marriage according to Islamic law, in which a contract must be entered into by the bridegroom on the one hand and a representative of the bride on the other before a recognized Islamic authority, and signed in the presence of at least two witnesses. So, after having secretly written their Jewish ketubah, the Jedidim officially drew up their Islamic marriage contract as well. The latter contained verses from the Koran, general terms of blessing, the names of the parties, the amount of the dowry, and, at the end or on the sides, the signatures of the witnesses and the date of the contract. In the case of a Jadid marriage contract the words "Jadid al-Islam" were added after the names of the bride and bridegroom. For instance, after the name of the bridegroom, Ali Ibn Husain, the word "Jadid" or "from the community of Jadid" would appear. It is interesting to note that the former Jews are now called Husain, Mohammed, Ali, Ismail, Faraj, etc.

Another highly interesting feature of these marrano ketubot are the signatures of the witnesses. They are not, as one might expect, written in the usual Persian script, but in Hebrew characters. This remarkable fact shows the tenacity with which the Persian

marranos retained their old alphabet and their daring in using it even in an official document before the Islamic court.

Usually a change of faith has meant a change of script: upon their conversion to Christianity the Spanish marranos adopted Latin characters in their script. To this day, however, the ledgers of the Persian marranos are made out in Hebrew script and their correspondence, which, like their speech, is in Persian, is written in the Hebrew alphabet. This Hebrew writing also served them as a kind of code in a secret marrano Persian dialect of their own, called "Lo Torai," in which some Hebrew words are still in use. Often these Hebrew signatures are followed by the designation "Hajji" or "Kerbelai," implying that the bearer has made a pilgrimage to Mecca or to Kerbelah, a holy city in Mesopotamia.

These signatures in the ketubot provide the first documentary evidence that Jewish pilgrims visited the holy places of the Islamic world. Mecca pilgrims enjoy a very special esteem in the eyes of the Moslems and when the neo-Moslems began to figure in the ranks of the "Hajjis," their social status was greatly improved. So much so, that they began to occupy high clerical positions in the administration of the holy mosque in Meshhed itself, such as lighter of the lamps, door-keepers of the mosque, and keepers of the keys of holy burial places. Their names are remembered to this day and one Jadid is known who even held the office of muezzin, i.e., a caller to prayers.

THE catastrophe of 1839 also initiated a Jewish migration which radically affected the pattern of Jewish distribution in Central Asia. A large stream of fugitives moved from Meshhed both to the East and to the West, in search of a new home free from the tyranny of the Shia sect. This migration and emigration of marranos extended first of all to the border lands such as Afghanistan, Turkestan, and Bokhara, where Jewish communities had existed for many years. It led also to new settlements along the old caravan route from Meshhed to the East as far as

Samarkand and Merv, and to the South as far as Bombay and Calcutta.

Of the history and present position of Afghanistan Jewry, their number, occupations, etc., we know very little. All we can definitely state is that they are descendants of the Jedidim who fled from Meshhed and found their first haven of refuge mainly in Herat, and by the end of the last century numbered 300 Jewish families.

The stream of refugees also reached Russian Turkestan and the present Jewish population of that province is made up, in the main, of their descendants. These refugees settled all along the stretch of country between Meshhed and Merv in Turkestan, one of the oldest and most famous of the caravan routes. In the town of Askabad at the beginning of this century the settlement of Jedidim comprised more than fifty families, who suffered much from the continuous Russian-Turcoman rivalry. The favorable position of the town, at a junction on the Trans-Caspian Railway, led to a rapid improvement of the economic conditions of the Jewish community, which continued to attract other Jedidim from Meshhed. However, the Russian press loudly denounced the continued influx of refugees, and the Russian government is even said to have issued an expulsion order against the Jedidim which was cancelled only through the intervention of friendly Turcoman tribes.*

* The phenomenon of Jewish marranos in Central Asia provided problems for many travelers and archaeologists. We find the Jedidim in Turkestan referred to as "so-called Jews" who are often "neither Yehudim nor Beni Israel. They call themselves simply Mussai, followers of Moses." These "Mussai" are none other than the former marranos of Meshhed. The expression "Mussai" in the mouth of the Jews of Merv arose because the Jedidim of Meshhed preferred to keep their coming from that district a secret. Instead of Meshhed they preferred to use the name "Mussai," which has nearly the same sound and in Hebrew writing nearly the identical characters. Proof of this can be found in a *Piut* written in the year 1905 by Salomon ben Mashiah and published in the Prayer Book for Persian marranos. Even in that Prayer Book this Jew from Meshhed did not abandon the customary caution and called his poem, which gives a description of the sufferings of the Jews of Meshhed, "A Poem of the Marranos of Mosche."

The marranos' colonies extend as far as Samarkand, across Bokhara, where before the Great War hundreds of Jedidim were settled. Southeast of Meshhed, along the caravan route of Dozdap-Karachi-Bombay, there also arose scattered settlements of Jedidim which developed a commercial importance. Some of the Jedidim settled in Bombay itself.

The stream of migration spread westward as well. Settlements of this marrano migration, small camps as it were, are encountered on the way from Meshhed to Teheran and further west. Many Jedidim joined previously existing Jewish communities in the interior of Persia which endure to this day. Since, according to Islamic Law, Moslems who renounce Islam are liable to the death penalty, the Jews from Meshhed were careful to call themselves Mussai or Sodomi, so that the masses might not suspect their true origin.

THE largest community of Jedidim to the west of Meshhed is in Jerusalem. Not founded immediately after the catastrophe of 1839, but only in the nineties of the last century, the causes which led to its foundation give us an insight into the inner life and mentality of the Jedidim.

Mention has already been made of the fact that the Jedidim who remained in Meshhed had been repeatedly urged by the leaders of Islam to undertake, like every true Moslem, the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in order to visit the tomb of the prophet Mohammed and the "Kaaba." Preachers in the Jadid mosque used every opportunity to impress this duty upon every Moslem, and not a few Jedidim undertook the pilgrimage to escape inquisitorial interference with their mode of life and to prevent the entire marrano community from being exposed to the suspicions of the Islamic Inquisition.

These marrano pilgrims were in a position to do much good for their community upon their return because of their prestige as "Hajji." Many of the Jewish pilgrims to Mecca, however, used the pilgrimage only to travel to Jerusalem, where they were finally able to

pour out their hearts in their own language at the Wailing Wall, and to throw off the mask of their secret life.

These escaped Mecca pilgrims form the nucleus of the Jadid colony in Jerusalem. To this day the religious life of the Jadid community in that city is concentrated in two synagogues which were founded by two "Hajjis" on their return from Mecca: the synagogue of Hajji Yeheskel (or Ishmael) and that of Hajji Adoniyahu.

The Jedidim who came to Jerusalem from Meshhed entered Palestine as Moslems and were looked upon as Mohammedan immigrants, as the names—Hajji Mohammed, Hajji Nasrullah and even Ali, Husain, etc.—on their passports implied. After they underwent the various formalities for a permanent residence in Palestine, many of the Jedidim sought to change their names and sent in applications for Palestinian nationality. Requests for changes of names, such as Husain into Chaim, Abdallah into Aaron, Ali into Ephraim, or Mohammed into Moses, naturally surprised government officials and provoked far-fetched speculation.

WITHIN the last few decades the Jadid colony in Jerusalem has been growing steadily. This is due both to their longing for escape from the burden of leading a double life, and the changed conditions in Eretz Israel. The message of the Balfour Declaration, the news of a renaissance of the Jewish nation, aroused in them a fervent hope for a speedy redemption from their ambivalent existence.

It is perhaps not well known that almost simultaneously with the "Hovevei Zion" in Russia, a similar movement was started in the Orient, and that towards the end of the last century there began a considerable immigration of Bokharian, Persian, Turkestan, and other Oriental Jews into Palestine. When the history of the Hibat Zion movement of Oriental Jewry comes to be written, it will be seen what an important part "Zion" and "Eretz Israel" has always played in the thoughts and feelings of Persian Jewry.

Long before Ahad Ha'am, Jerusalem was

for Oriental and especially for Persian Jewry a "cultural center" in the truest sense of the word. Nothing demonstrates this better than the fact that a Jewish-Persian press originated in Jerusalem to satisfy not only the requirements of the few Persian Jews resident there at the time, but to meet the needs, both literary and liturgical, of the Jews in Central Asia. Among the products of the Hebrew-Persian printing press sent from Jerusalem to Middle Asia, there is, significantly enough, a Jewish-Persian translation of Abraham Maju's novel *Ahavat Zion* which even ran into a second edition.

In this Jewish-Persian printing activity, Jedidim also took part, and in 1908 a Persian Prayer Book was published, edited by Mulla Murat, who had secretly occupied the position of Rabbi in Meshhed. Another publication by a Jadid is typical of its sentiments. It is a booklet called *Sefer Millim Shisha*, a small dictionary in six languages. Its object is to give pilgrims from Central Asia to Palestine linguistic material to enable them to become acquainted with Hebrew, while giving them knowledge of the languages of the people in the neighboring countries. It states its purpose in the preface: "In order to teach pilgrims to the Holy Land to speak all languages met with on their way . . . without any trouble or difficulty."

Ironically enough, of all Persian Jews the marranos of Meshhed have become and remain the richest. Many are prosperous merchants dealing in carpets, skins, clothes, antiques, spices, drugs, etc. This commercial prosperity of the Jedidim, which distinguishes them from nearly all other communities in Persia, is closely connected with their life as marranos. Being officially Moslems, they were able to develop their capabilities freely, and were exempt from all the restrictions on Jews in other parts of

Persia. Further, as merchants, their paths led them across the border of Persia and along the most important caravan routes, where they always met the newly founded colonies of fugitive Jedidim—in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Bokhara, and Turkestan. These colonies of Jedidim along the great highways of trade were the main support for the commercial activity of the marranos of Meshhed. They at once built up trade relations with each other which would have taken a Mohammedan or Armenian—the strongest competitors of the Jews—a long time to establish.

This flourishing financial position of the marranos is of benefit to Jews outside Meshhed as well. Here is an example: The late Shah of Persia happened to be on a tour of inspection some years ago. Preparations for his reception went on for weeks in the bigger towns; people put out their flags, the streets were cleaned and decorated, the officials were trembling, and the school children got new uniforms for the great occasion. The Jewish community in Yezd, however, could not afford such expense, and it was then that the Jedidim of Meshhed stepped in and sent money to the Jewish school children that they too might have new clothes for the reception of the Shah.

Recent developments have influenced the Meshhed community both for good and evil. The reforms of the late Shah Riza Pehlevi deprived the clergy of much of their temporal power and under the Russian occupation of Persia the Jedidim were able to act more overtly as Jews. As a consequence of this, the wave of anti-Jewish feeling that is sweeping the Middle East—resulting from the Palestine situation—has adversely affected the Jedidim, as Jews. The last chapter in the strange history of the Persian marranos has yet to be written.